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The Intuitive Artistry of Action Learning in Organizations



by Tom Cockburn

Action Learning and action research are forms of learning by doing. The method of action research was originally credited to Kurt Lewin (1948: 202-3) but action learning was a development associated most commonly today with the pioneering work of Reg Revans (1982, 1998). Some forms of action research and learning are gaining a greater level of academic acceptability (Burgess, 2006). Practice or taking action in the real world necessarily involves interacting at some level with other people. For many action researchers, such activities ought to be part of a democratic, participative process (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Kemmis, 2001). Heron argues that you can only study people if you deal with them as persons. That is, deal with the ‘subjects’ of your research as intentional ‘actors’ in their own life-drama and thus as meaning makers as well as ‘meaning-takers’ (Heron, 1996).

Others have since differentiated categories or modes of learning called Participatory Action Research and Participatory Action Learning which basically focus upon the empowering aspect of this approach to learning for individuals and/or communities. Yet others have defined categories called action science and action inquiry. However, as these are all derivatives of the two original modes in many ways, I will focus on Action research and Action Learning. I tend not to separate the two and rather regard them as two sides of the same coin. The two concepts have often been regarded as separate activities: one about finding new knowledge or re-interpreting old knowledge, the other about application of that knowledge. That is groups of learner-researchers working on their own, real, practical problems with a focus on learning geared for implementation in the learners’ work or social life. The groups involved in action research and action learning are called learning sets.

Models of action learning place the learner and their peers in the foreground and central to their own learning and development more than

other forms of learning. Another key element is the immediate relevance of the knowledge gained and the process of learning. The Revans formula for learning is $L = P+Q$, where L=learning, P=Programmed or taught components and Q=questioning (of the processes, basic premises and substantive content of the knowledge held to be true). Thus, by utilising the combined knowledge and skills of a small group of people (typically 6-8 in a group), combined with skilled questioning (of 'evidence' presented about a topic, issue or problem), they are enabled to re-interpret old concepts, revise constraints and to thereby produce fresh ideas - often without needing new knowledge inputs. Not only that, but he recognized that to be effective all learning had to take place faster than the rate of change in the environment, hence the formula, $L > C$.

Knowledge derived in this way can also be clustered into categories or taxonomies based on whether it refers to specific objects of knowledge development (e.g. subjects or disciplines), particular processes, products or learning events (Von Krogh *et al*, 1998). Alternatively, knowledge can be categorised in terms of how it is acquired or where it is located e.g. such as embodied tacitly in behaviour patterns or in skills of individuals, or collectively in teams or in organisational databases. The above discussion has often tended to privilege explicit knowledge and intentional action. That 'rationalism' -- of action learning proponents rather than the method per se--has been criticized in the eyes of some, who argue the methodology has greater but as yet unrealized potential (Willmott, 1994, 1997).

However, there are various levels of what could be called 'intentional' action; some of it is explicit and well-articulated, other actions are tacit and unarticulated. Some actions by people are unconscious, intuitive and/or unknown, whilst others form part of the complexity of the richly-interactive social systems people inhabit. The latter forms of action may then truly be called unintentional although they do have a tangible and explicit impact on events, processes and systems' and their affordances to use Cook and Brown's terminology (Cook and Brown, 2002). Affordances refers to what a system and context allows' or affords the people involved in terms of both constraints and opportunities.

The awareness and surfacing of the complex, tacit or internalized as well as the explicit elements of interaction requires deeper forms of reflection and challenge. That is in order to confront habitual or routine approaches to self-knowledge as much as to technical forms of knowledge embodied in action learning processes. The sorts of thinking-in-action that got the learning set to the position where they had a problem to deal with in the first place. Some of these unintentional processes are most obvious or more noticeable when people are new to a group, team or organization.

Action Learning as legitimate peripheral participation

The concept of *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger, 19XX) is relevant. In this model the process of induction of new members into such groups is called legitimate peripherality. That is the ‘newbie’ begins on the periphery but is increasingly socialized or drawn into full membership of the community as they gain greater awareness and relevant skills regarding the aims and tasks of the community of practice. The latter process involves more than learning the job as per the job description since a key component is ‘fitting in’ with the rest of the community in terms of goals, expectations, values, orientations to tasks, use of tools and skill sets. Moving from ‘outsider’ to insider therefore requires acquisition of unspoken tacit knowledge as much, if not more than the explicit technical knowledge. That idea i.e. of legitimate ‘peripherality’ has some resonance with action learning insofar as the peripheral participant is engaged in a process of action learning in order to become part of a community in much the same way as the individuals in a learning set. Of course it is possible to then as ‘insider’ lose sight of the embedded, internalized and embodied features of the community of practice. The taken-for-granted assumptions of the ‘culture’ can then become a constraint on future learning and the community can become a closed, sect-like group adhering to often unspoken values.

So to overcome that, Revans stressed the need for critical evaluation by a process of questioning within action learning sets as indicated in the

$L=P + Q$ formula above. That approach steps aside from a traditional view of inquiry as a search for one valid ‘truth’. All understanding is seen as socially constructed from a particular viewpoint (Denzin, 1997), and all action is in therefore a pursuit of a specific –even if unspoken--valued purpose. So then we are no longer simply pursuing action concerned with getting ‘right’ answers. There are parallels here with Rorty’s view of irony and its use. His notion of the ‘ironist’ as someone who owns up to the ‘contingency’ of their own language, identity and community, combining a strong commitment nevertheless but with a clear awareness of their own potential ‘bias’ (Reason, 2003; Rorty, 1989:61).

My own research outlined briefly in an earlier issue (see Interface#2) concerns the review and interpretive analysis of a form of action learning in the tacit domain. The study particularly focused on mapping MBA teams’ learning and emotional regimes that they developed. These landscapes were framed within a commitment index based on axes of trust and anxiety. A typology of each team’s emotional regime and an embodied multi-spiral model describing individual as well as collective learning development emerged. The research showed how people learned a lot about their own behavior in the throes of learning to collaboratively inquire into the dynamic process of their group and reflect on their own contribution to this activity. They were developing a capacity for self-reflective learning and the invitation to relate to others in more open, authentic and equal relationships. As previously indicated everyone did not travel to the end of that road. Some fell by the wayside and reverted to archetypal forms of behavior related to the emotional regimes described. Some, such as the suspicious mercenaries often struggled with the unacknowledged power differentials and instrumentality of their own and others’ actions on projects. Tacit knowledge has been further developed by Eraut and Hirsch (2007) in considering how managers make decisions. They describe what they consider as the three main types of tacit knowledge involved.

1. *Situational understanding*, which is based largely on experience and remains mainly tacit.

2. *Standard, routinised procedures* which have been developed through to allow people to cope with work whilst minimizing information overload and, once the competence stage has been achieved some of the procedures become what he calls 'automatised' or are performed almost robotically and are increasingly. Thus, even though they may have begun their lifecycle as explicit procedural knowledge they reach a stage of routinisation which renders them 'invisible'. A common example might be learning to drive a car. Initially the learner is fully aware and conscious of the steering, signaling and gear manipulations required but as they 'absorb' such actions into their behavior patterns in cars they can go onto 'automatic pilot' and sometimes reach a destination without even recalling how they got there.
3. *Intuitive decision making*, whereby pattern recognition allied to rapid responses to developing situations are both based on the tacit application of tacit rules. Here patterns of cues in a situation are internalized and stimulate somewhat fixed patterns of responses.

Schon in an earlier work seems to have extended this concept –number 3, above--with his notion of 'intuitive artistry', involving the "...kinds of knowing embedded in competent practice."(Schon, 1995:29). He did not define this idea formally but, from examples he gives, it seems to refer to the tacit knowledge, or "competence" that practitioners apply in situations of complexity and uncertainty (Schon, 1995:29). That is, the ability of skilled practitioners to 'sense', through the use of an instrument, or tool, qualities of the materials being worked and respond accordingly. This is close to what Cook and Brown describe as 'affordances' but refers to the solo practitioner skills rather than the team or group system level.

Such forms of tacit knowledge harbor seeds of groupthink and conformity and need challenge and some discontinuous forms of learning interventions. That is where there is a break from the 'tried and

trusted' recipes to allow for some reframing and reconfiguration of the issues, the constraints and the resources. Then, the learning set can begin to build up ways to pursue change and an agenda or action plan with measurable outcomes given in a timeframe that is reasonable.

How can I use this approach in my organisation?

One way is to build in challenges to how decisions are made as well as developing a community of practice that is both action-oriented and reflective. Such action learning-based communities need a learning space that is not only supported by senior management but one where challenge and questioning are incorporated and valued. This is a form of capacity building, since such skills can form what Nonaka (1995) has called a 'hypertext' organizational structure where learning is being exchanged as the 'trained' and openly supported (by senior management) members of the action learning sets become evangelists across the organization. There are a number of current examples of the use of action learning in large and small organizations in the public, not-for-profit sector as well as the private sector and in services as well as production in many countries (Payne and Keep, 2003). Whilst these do not wholly conform to all of the prescriptions referred to above, they do show the way forward in many respects and serve to indicate a growing trend in the corporate sector.

Some U.S. examples of organizations using action learning type methods for organizational development and change are briefly described below.

USA

General Electric (GE)

General Electric (GE) has a process they call 'work outs'. The company forms action learning teams to work on organizational problems that are real, relevant, and require decisions. Typically, these consist of two teams of five to seven people from diverse businesses and functions within GE working together on the specified problem. Time is built in for the team members to reflect on the total learning experience and it is

hoped that the diversity of the teams will engender sufficient challenge when there is well-developed facilitation.

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) used action learning as part of a 2-year development plan for middle managers. FAA wanted managers to learn from their practice whilst they worked on some real world problems. Senior managers were sponsors for the action learning teams and also identified critical problems, issues and concerns that were not only vehicles for learning in the teams but also served the organization's needs. Three teams met over a six month period using action learning to resolve problems on these projects. Finally after that time they presented their findings and results to their senior managers who were amazed at the gains made.

Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC)

The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) found that managers were prevented from being able to perform optimally due to the myriad of organizational issues and problems they faced. They also realized that training alone would not solve the problem. Thus they decided to use action learning as the backbone of their core training for their executives and managers. So Action learning became a key organizational problem-solving and decision-making method for FDIC.

It is worth noting however, that the emergent emotional landscapes of these teams is seldom referred to in publicly-available documents but my own research suggests that emotional regimes that spontaneously emerge require different approaches and, in some dysfunctional cases 'therapies'.

Concluding thoughts

Action learning can be used to good effect in organizational development and change but its proponents have aspirations to be more than simply another tool of management. There is a growing interest in this method of self-managed learning in the various forms it takes such

as action research, action science, action inquiry, participative action research. The interest is not confined to explicit or to tacit learning, or to particular academic or industry sectors and the span is global. Used with awareness of the potential as well as the shortcomings and with attention to the processes involved, real and sustainable change can be achieved in terms of personal and professional development, organizations and systems and, importantly, knowledge gained.

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